



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Alexandria's postmaster and the American West

*Alexandria Times, January 30, 2020*

*Image: Nicolas Trist. Library of Congress*

Alexandria has had many of American history's key players set foot within its limits. From early American movers and shakers George Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson, to 20th-century icons such as John F. Kennedy, Cass Elliott, Earl Lloyd and Jim Morrison – as well as many presidents and vice presidents – we've had more than our fair share of residents and visitors of historical significance.

However, did you know that our former postmaster is primarily responsible for the shape of the American West, including California, Arizona and New Mexico?

Long before he became Alexandria's postmaster, Nicholas Trist was the chief clerk of the State Department under then Secretary of State James Buchanan, a future president himself. In 1847, he was commissioned to negotiate the treaty to end the War with Mexico.

The process was fraught with complications, first with a personality clash between Trist and commanding General Winfield Scott, who had a very different idea of what Trist was assigned to negotiate. The two men eventually reconciled and became lifelong friends.

Trist then had to navigate the politics of Washington from Mexico, as President James K. Polk's demands were considered unreasonable by the Mexican government. Then the Mexican government had to be re-formed, and finally, Trist ignored Polk's recall due to the slow pace of the negotiations.

The final product, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, set the new border between the United States and Mexico and included the borders of modern-day Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. One of Polk's frustrations with Trist was his inability to have Baja California included in the deal.

Upon his return to Washington, Trist was excoriated by members of the Whigs and the Democrats. The Whigs objected to western expansionism, especially since that increased the likelihood of conflicts regarding the expansion of slavery. Democrats were upset that Trist had defied Polk, and that he hadn't received more land concessions.

Trist's political career was done, and his family moved around for the rest of his life, saddled by debt, a common fate for prominent Virginians at the time.

Despite being married to Thomas Jefferson's granddaughter Virginia, Trist was one of the first supporters of President Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party. He was rewarded for his support during the administration of President Ulysses Grant with his appointment as Alexandria's postmaster.

Trist died in his residence on Water – now Lee – Street on Feb. 11, 1874. The Alexandria Gazette's obituary read, "He was a gentleman of ability and integrity, and was much esteemed by all who knew him for his virtues and many sterling good qualities."

Generous words for one of the most controversial characters of 19th-century American history.





## **Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia**

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*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*